

The Photography of Street Art as a Representation of Place

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Contents

Chapter One.....	01
Chapter Two	
Section One: Introduction.....	06
Section Two: The Use of Vernacular Signage in Social Documentation: The Early Years.....	08
Section Three: The Use of Vernacular in Social Documentation– A Tradition Passed Forward.....	23
Section Four: Establishing a Field: Street Art and Graffiti Replaces Vernacular Signage in Modes of Documentation.....	28
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	49
Chapter Four: Conclusion.....	61
Appendix 1: Bibliography.....	65
Appendix 2: List of Illustrations.....	69
Appendix 3: List of Works Submitted.....	71



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This research project explores how the photography of street art can contribute to the understanding of place. This argument is supported through an examination of techniques and concepts utilized by a range of photographers who have practiced social documentation. The research aims to demonstrate how the photography of street art can reflect social, cultural, and natural identities that are unique to specific environments.

The background to this project is located in the tradition of social documentary in the work of mid 20th century photographers such as Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Manuel Alvarez Bravo. The exegesis explores these artists' abilities to capture the vernacular elements that characterize specific locations. The exegesis discusses the arrangement of elements within individual photographs, as well as the arrangement of the photographs in series, and specifically how these strategies provide a social and political commentary. The project is further contextualized by a range of contemporary color photographers including Joel Sternfeld, Steven Shore, Jeff Laio, and Jeff Whetstone, demonstrating the potential for color to contribute to an exploration of place within social documentary photography

The result of the research is a collection of photographs that describe differences in a range of social landscapes by comparing styles and techniques in street art from three different countries: Australia, South Africa, and the United States. The thesis exhibition consists of a series of large scale photographic prints that depict street artworks in their surrounding context, including people and natural or built environments. In these photographs, street art is the dominant form of vernacular expression. It embodies the visual characteristics of environments undergoing pronounced change. These photographs form a narrative concerned with the social, political, and natural identities of a place.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This research project argues that the photography of street art can contribute to the understanding of place. The research aims to demonstrate that the photography of street art has the ability to reflect social, cultural, and natural identities that are unique to specific environments. This argument is supported through an examination of techniques and concepts utilized by a range of photographers who have practiced social documentation. The exegesis examines how this type of documentation can be considered important to the preservation of place.

For the purposes of this paper, the term place will encompass a number of different things, including the social conditions of a location, the cultural and political identities related to a location, as well as the natural and built environments of a location. Art and its purposes are often directly affected by the places and spaces they are created in. People are shaped by their surrounding landscape and culture, and the art people produce usually speaks directly out of this interaction. Jeff Malpas explains in his book, *Place and Experience*, that the land around us is a reflection of our culture, society, and its capabilities.¹ As Malpas explains, in return, the environments around us consequently determine our thoughts and activities, and this relationship speaks loudly through the creative constructions of its

¹ Malpas, J. E. *Place And Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999.) , 1–18.

people, such as art and poetry. In this paper I want to establish how a sense of place can be represented through the photography of street artworks. If artistic expressions such as street art, which are speaking from a direct interaction with a place, are captured within their surrounding locations, I believe the identity of a particular place has further opportunity to be understood, analysed and preserved. I want to explore how a sense of place can be developed through the combined captured elements of architecture, people, and street artworks. A sense of place is relevant to understanding how the people in a certain place react and interact with their surrounding environment. Captured street artworks contribute to the analysis of such information as they are representing direct relationships that have developed from this interaction. The development of a sense of place has the ability to reveal the role of family, culture, politics and community. These are the elements that connect and bind the captured street artwork to the place. This provides background and context for the understanding of the street artwork and how it relates to its surroundings.

I will begin in the context chapter by examining how certain photographers capture vernacular elements in signage that correlate to the identities of specific locales, and will continue by exploring how vernacular signage can be appropriately substituted by street art to describe similar effects. In this case, the vernacular can include any sort of language or signage that appears within a photograph. It is the assortment of signs, billboards, advertisements, posters, graffiti, and engravings, among other things, that are visible on the street. According to the dictionary, vernacular is the commonly spoken language or dialect of a particular people or place.² For the purposes of this paper the term vernacular signage will include the variety of words and expressions that appear within captured locations. I intend to explore how these elements can be observed as indicators of place,

² “vernacular”. Merriam-Webster Online. Retrieved November, 2011.
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular>

and how they can be viewed similarly to street art as reflections of the environments they appear in.

The term street art encapsulates a wide range of markings that appear in public places. This can include traditional graffiti artworks, commissioned or illegal murals created individually or communally, stencils, wheat pastes, sculptures, and street installations. It is the art that appears in public spaces that challenges and communicates to the existing environment with its own set of language and criteria. Books such as *Graffiti World*, *Bathroom Graffiti*, and *Wall and Piece*, among others, will be referenced in the exegesis to better understand the functions of street art within the variety of places it appears. Street art is best described by Rennie Ellis in *The All-New Australian Graffiti*, as a channel of communication to the broader public creating the ultimate alternative media. "Graffiti must be one of the great natural safety valves of society. It's the personal expression of a single mind – direct, honest and with no commercial motive."³

The photographs of vernacular expression and street art that will be examined in this paper are meant to explore personal, political, economical, cultural, and natural connections to selected sites. This is one of the ways photographs can define place, and everything that makes individual places unique. This paper aims to explore how the cultural and geographical nuances that define locations can be explored and preserved, specifically within photographs that include significant context. In some cases this context is drawn out through the presentation of images in a series. In the work of Walker Evans for example, in the book *American Photographs*, images are placed side by side to provide a substantial background to the vernacular expressions captured, by detailing the people and architecture that surround it.

In the context chapter I will discuss the background to this

³ Ellis, Rennie. *The All-New Australian Graffiti*. (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1985.) 4.

project, which is located in the tradition of social documentary in the work of mid 20th century photographers such as Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Specifically, it will explore these artists' abilities to capture vernacular expression. The use of images as historical documents is a theme that is explored within this chapter to further understand the capabilities of photographs in preserving important aspects of place. This argument is supported through text such as *Eyewitnessing, The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* written by Peter Bourke, and *Picturing The Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*, written by Caroline Knowles and Paul Sweetman. These texts help explain how historians may analyze images to identify political and socio-economic trends, which in turn leads to a greater understanding of specific places at specific times.

The work of Jessica May in her article, *American Modern*, is explored to better understand social documentary photography. I also describe the work of Robert Coles in the book titled *Doing Documentary Work*. These texts will provide support in the discussion of works by mid twentieth century documentary photographers, specifically, works capturing socio-economic conditions and the lives attached to such circumstances.

Social documentary photography has its roots in the 19th century, with the documentation of particular working and living conditions that in some cases eventually led to significant cultural and political change. Social documentary took further form in the following century, as depression-ridden America was documented with a detailed level of in-depth examination. In the mid twentieth century, The Farm Security Administration hired photographers and writers to report on the plight of poor farmers in specific areas of America.⁴ The photographs that were produced are concerned with

⁴ Evans, Walker, Szarkowski, John. *Walker Evans Photographs*. (London: Secker & Warburg, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1971.) 14.

particular socio-economic groups, and the conditions in which they were working and living. The images commissioned by the FSA set a standard for social documentary photography. This photographic work was associated with a coherent desire for political and social change. "For the social documentary photographer, the camera is not so much an artistic tool as it is an instrument for social reform and political action." ⁵

The reason for examining this work in the exegesis is to pinpoint the power of photography in representing such change. It forms a base from which to examine photography as a method of documenting political and cultural conditions. Social documentary photography establishes a 'sense of place' through its images. A sense of place emerges through the experience and knowledge of a particular area, its history, geography and culture. A sense of place is the understanding of what makes an area unique, and what experiences and stories anchor people to it. A sense of place can be complex and multi-faceted. It is a blend of the land with the memories, art and stories of the people that live there. The context chapter will examine the use of vernacular signage within the field of social documentary photography as a way of establishing a local specificity of place. The observer can examine political and cultural changes through the times by examining a combination of captured vernacular elements.

The project is further contextualized in chapter two by examining the work from a range of contemporary colour photographers including Joel Sternfeld, Steven Shore, Jeff Laio, and Jeff Whetstone, demonstrating the potential for colour to further contribute to the exploration of place within social documentary

⁵ Young, Stephanie. '*Social Documentary Photography: An Appreciation*', *Review of Communication*, 8:3, pp. 254–256.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15358590701851657>

photography.

The third chapter of the exegesis discusses the methodology and the results of my research findings. It describes the process involved in creating the accompanying exhibition, which consists of a collection of photographs that document street art, graffiti, and commissioned murals in three different countries: Australia, South Africa, and the United States. There is also a series of large and small-scale photographic prints that depict street artworks in their surrounding context, including people and natural or built environments. In these photographs, street art is the dominant form of vernacular expression. It embodies the visual characteristics of environments undergoing pronounced change. Street art is often a signifier of change, and is usually found in environments that are undergoing economical, political or cultural transition. Street Art is often an attempt to create a unique dialogue concerned with the changes and transitions at hand.

Finally, in the conclusion, I discuss how my research project contributes to the field of photography. The conclusion also provides a summary of the outcomes of my research, and the overall effectiveness of the final exhibition. It discusses the results of my photographic exploration, and the success and value of researching how a sense of place can be created through the photography of street artworks. It explains the overall effectiveness of this process in describing distinctions as well as similarities between the locations in which the captured street art is found. It analyses the effectiveness of the photographs collected and the different ways they describe the social, political and economic conditions of place. Overall the exegesis investigates the concepts explored through my research. It provides background to the project as well as a discussion of the accompanying exhibitions methods and processes.

Chapter Two: Context

Section One: Introduction

This chapter investigates the artists and the photographic projects that contextualize my work. It also investigates the strategies and artistic approaches, such as compositional techniques and methods of presentation that I want to develop within my own work. I have researched these approaches by other photographers in order to strengthen my own photography both visually and conceptually. The majority of this chapter explores how the photography of vernacular signage and expression contributes to the understanding of place. It is followed with a discussion of the photography of street art and how it can be captured with similar effects to describe characteristics of place.

Photographic approaches of particular artists such as Walker Evans and Brassai have been analysed for their effectiveness in displaying vernacular/street art in their surrounding locations. Some work, for example, includes significant context around the subject, and the manner in which it relates to its respected locale is evident within an individual photograph. Other work takes a more sequential approach and displays images of vernacular elements and street art next to images of their locations, providing the same opportunity for analysis by presenting images in a series.

There are a number of compositional elements to my own work that will be contextualized within this chapter. I have tried to learn from the visual approaches of artists like Martha Stewart and Steven Shore by applying them to my art. One example of this is the inclusion of the context surrounding the subject at hand. Equally important is the use of the figure, and how the inclusion of people in the photograph adds to the reading of place. Also, I examine the effectiveness of the compositional approaches of particular artists

such as Walker Evans. These compositional techniques include the use of frontality, and the placement of architecture within the frame. It is important to locate my project in relation to a clearly defined field. This includes the critical review of artworks by several artists of relevance, with reference to their key concepts and procedures.

The second section of this chapter explores photographers in the mid 20th century and their abilities in capturing the vernacular elements that characterize specific locations. It discusses the arrangement of elements within individual photographs, as well as the arrangement of the photographs in series, and specifically how these strategies provide a social and political commentary.

The third section of the chapter will investigate how the tradition of social documentation has been followed up with works from contemporary colour photographers such as Jeff Whetstone and Steven Shore. These artists experiment with this same subject matter in colour, photographing vernacular signage on the street in an attempt to portray descriptive elements of place. These artists have produced images that are visual archives preserving both cultural and natural histories. This section will explore how these artists capture vernacular expression within a broad landscape, describing social constructs particular to specific locations. I will analyse several images as I establish the field in which my artwork fits.

The final section in this chapter will discuss artists that have documented street art. This is a phenomenon that came into fruition roughly thirty years ago, and up to this point there have been only a small number of photographers that have dedicated their art practice to capturing it. There are a number of photographers working today, like Jeff Liao and Selina Miles that are using film, multimedia and digital photography to capture street artworks and their elaborate productions. The majority of these visual artists make their work accessible through the Internet, which has become the primary source of communication amongst the graffiti world. Paint supply companies have pushed the documentation of street artworks in the right

direction, funding the production of film clips and photo-shoots in an attempt to promote their own product and the work of the artists attached to that company. For example, the paint supply company Molotow has a website that is dedicated to displaying photographs and film clips of the various artists producing street artworks with Molotow products. The final section of this chapter will investigate contemporary artists utilizing different methods to capture street artworks.

Section Two: Vernacular Signage in Social Documentation: The Early Years

Photographers like Walker Evans, Brassai, Robert Frank, Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Lee Friedlander, to name a few, had a unique ability to capture the vernacular in ways that detail unique characteristics of place. These artists set the standard for social documentary on the street level. They worked with early technologies in photography, including large format cameras and sheet film, as well as 35mm black and white film and cameras. Their conceptual and technical skills provided a crystal clear lens to the street, and they brought us images that archived changing cultures in nations transitioning through tumultuous times.

The methods of presentation are the primary focus within this section. This includes the arrangement of elements within an individual photograph, as well as the arrangement of the artist's photographs as a collective. The layout or sequencing of images unfolds many interesting layers purposefully describing various cultures in their respected locations. In combination, these arrangements accurately describe the street, as well as visually preserve the elements needed to understand nuances of place. I have learned from this research that a particular arrangement of images can be effective in controlling the visual journey of a viewer's experience.

The concept of providing context, for example, can be stretched from the individual image to that in a series, and the scale of such context can be expanded significantly. This is a technique I have attempted to utilize within my own photography to better describe street art and its surrounding environment.

Another important aspect of these artists work is how they document locations experiencing physical and cultural change, such as the work of Walker Evans in the depression ridden American South. These areas, both urban and rural, reflect extraordinary political and economic transition. Often, my personal search for images of street art leads me into communities in the midst of economic and political transitions. It is important for my own work to examine the techniques used by photographers in the past, and recognize how these periods of change can best be preserved through the documentation of vernacular elements, the culture, and the surrounding architectural landscape.

One of the first artists to thoroughly document and categorize graffiti through film was the French street photographer Brassai. His images offer an interesting juxtaposition of scale. He had a unique approach to documenting the vernacular, and a distinctive style to his presentation of images in a series. For his project, *Graffiti*, Brassai would hunt down and photograph graffiti throughout different locations within the city of Paris. He kept detailed notebooks filled with sketches and addresses in search of interesting marks on the wall, ground, and trees.⁶ The anthology, *Graffiti*, was published in Germany, in 1960. The book is filled with close up abstract images of hundreds of graffiti markings he found in and around the city of Paris. Some images, however, like the first two images that appear in the book, depict a deeper and more sophisticated scale in which to contextualize the graffiti.

These images are examples that include ample context, and

⁶ Brassai. *Graffiti*. (Paris: Flammarion, 1993.) 6.

allow for the analysis of place to occur within a single photograph. This is achieved by including a combination of elements: architecture, people, and particularly, aspects of vernacular expression present on the street. For Brassai's publication, *Graffiti*, he uses these images to set the scene. They are the first images presented and they are the only such images to appear in the book. The rest of the photographs in the book display only the graffiti, and fail to include significant context around the documented markings. This approach works, however, because the first few images remind us of the type of environment in which these marking are found. The atmosphere of the captured locations remains in the back of the viewers mind, as the remainder of the substantial series of close up photographs are unravelled. In my opinion, the first images, which include significant context, are the most dynamic photographs compositionally to appear in the series.



Fig. 1. Brassai, *Eclipse*, 1933–1934.

The first photograph in the book *Graffiti* displays the exterior of a fire ridden brick building. The ten story or so dilapidated façade is

decorated with vernacular signage and vanishing advertisements. The complexity of textures present on the wall creates a visually attractive, complex pattern, within the highly contrasted, black and white photograph. The graffiti in the image is the fading advertisement. It sits in the upper left third of the photograph and extends across to the right hand side. The inclusion of the ground, sky, and nearby buildings allow us to orientate the painted advertisement within the context of its surroundings. This image works because we are placed directly in the city scene and can read the graffiti within the proper scale in order to make sense of it. The empty void leaves us searching for something to focus on. We become the observer of a desolate environment, and the only real signs of life are embedded within the surface of the wall.

The same photographic techniques are displayed in the image



Fig. 2. Brassai. *Hotel*. 1931.

on the following page. This photograph depicts a darkly lit alley in the heart of Paris. It captures a delicately eroding coat of paint that creates an unfolding abstract pattern on the foreground wall. The words

“Hotel De La Belle Etoile” are stamped above on the corner brick, reminding the viewer of cultural language relevant to the captured location. Leaning lines of architecture overlap and disappear at various angles. The physical nature of the city is on full display, as the vernacular spreads and spots the surroundings. Within this composition the viewer is able to interact with the environment and pursue the dimensions of the cityscape while relating to the language of its culture. Brassai captures the vernacular in a way that describes the social landscape, emphasizing characteristics specific to that time and place. His visual techniques and concepts help paint the city’s soul with every image.

Brassai’s photographs capture graffiti and its many expressions as an acting function within place, and the collection of images within this book can be considered as an essential archive to the cultural history of Paris. In a book titled *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*, Caroline Knowles and Paul Sweetman explain how the analysis of photographic images has much to contribute to the study of society and culture. They argue that more importance should be placed on the value of reading photographs as informative historical artefacts.⁷ The photography of graffiti often offers images of people and characters within painted or scratched out works that can then be referenced within the larger scale to the surrounding environment, telling us stories of the culture amongst the concrete city.

The concept of capturing the vernacular is a tradition that was exercised by a number of notable twentieth-century photographers such as Walker Evans and Manuel Alvarez Bravo. These artists utilized the vernacular in a way that creates a local flavour of place, documenting a cultural connection to the landscapes being captured. In the book *Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs*, the work of

⁷ Knowles, Caroline, and Sweetman, Paul. *Picturing The Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Walker Evans are compiled together and explored in detail. Throughout their work each artist expresses a conscious effort for capturing the vernacular in an attempt to describe with detail the layers of cultural language that are present on the street. These photographs describe the socio-political identities of places by capturing the vernacular elements unique to different locations. This is a strategy that proves crucial in understanding the capabilities of photography in representing place. If executed appropriately the photography of vernacular expression has the ability to speak volumes about social and political situations. Depending on the place, the particular elements captured, and the composition of the photograph, images of vernacular expression have the ability to tell us stories and describe true identities of places and the culture attached. As evident in the work of artists like Alvarez Bravo, this combination of elements, if composed correctly, can have a powerful effect.

Alvarez Bravo depicts a scene in one image titled *Landscape and*



Fig. 3. Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *Landscape and Gallop*, 1932.

Gallop, that comments on Mexico's tumultuous era of cultural rebellion. Within the photograph is a painting of a white horse on a blank wall, framed eloquently under the hot summer sun. The horse is running swiftly through an open plain, seemingly scared of what is behind it, yet excited by the open air of freedom. The horse becomes a

political representation of the cultural tension apparent in Mexico at that time. There is a dark shadow spanning from left to right across the frame, cast by the looming pine that stretches up and out of the image. Bravo composed this photograph in a way that creates a dialect between captured painting and location. By flattening out the focal plane, the building and painting rests flush with the eyes. The photograph places the public painting into context. It allows the angles of the building to line up. The doors, windows, and bricks, share geometry with the images frame, and the perspective captured shapes to the confines of the photographic dimensions. Bravo has directed a multilayered reading of the environment. He has juxtaposed natural and built worlds, real life and pictorial representation, describing important aspects of the social landscape in Mexico. The presence of nature plays an important role in this photograph. The high desert sun reminds the viewer of the latitudinal orientation, as dark shadows blanket the dry gravel road and sidewalk. The description of the natural elements aids the description and contextualization of the painting in subject. The lack of human existence within the frame also adds to the intrigue of the photograph.

Alvarez Bravo's images speak from the heart of the people of Mexico. This is evident in his collection of images presented in the book *M. Alvarez Bravo*. The series of photographs he collected of graffiti, advertisements, handprints, and markings, combined with beautifully composed portraits of the people, are a significant way to describe the ethos of the culture. Alvarez spent many years systematically photographing the works of revolutionary muralists as well as working with colonial paintings and folk art. He photographed the vast ceiling murals of Orozco. Alvarez identified an energy within these painted works that responds to the direct power and violence attached to the Mexican revolution.⁸ Through his photographs, Bravo was an advocate for social and political change. In *Masters of*

⁸ Livingston, Jane, Castro, Alex. *M. Alvarez Bravo*. (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 1978.) 14.

Photography, Paul Strand explains, “Manuel Alvarez Bravo’s work is rooted firmly in his love and compassionate understanding of his own country, its people, their problems and their needs. He wishes to speak with warmth about Mexico as Atget spoke about Paris.”⁹

The use of the vernacular in Bravo’s images speaks to the heritage of Mexican culture, and creates a multilayered, complex reading of the landscape, explicitly addressing the political and cultural transitions being experienced in Mexico during his lifetime. As explained in *Masters of Photography*, Alvarez Bravo was an authority on Mexican mural art, but the major forces that shaped his photography were not mural art but the culture itself. The art he captured on the street provided an even deeper, almost dream like reference to the culture.

Walker Evans was another photographer who presented the vernacular with pinpoint clarity, seamlessly blending cultural references into the landscape in both urban and rural settings. He captured everything vernacular, including signs, billboards, theatre marquees, graffiti, street signs, advertising posters, hand painted shop fronts, and placed them within their social and architectural surroundings. He had a preoccupation with the vernacular. He even collected signs and would exhibit them alongside the photographic representations. His fascination with capturing text truly embodied the predominant forms of street expression that characterized the early 20th century. It was the beginning of a culture of consumption, driven by in-your-face advertisements and textual messages. Evans recognized the ephemeral nature of the vernacular present at this time. The street signs and movie posters he photographed had a limited lifespan and spoke volumes about the nature of a culture inherent to that specific period.¹⁰ These were the signs of the times, visual evidence for future generations to observe and analyse. After

⁹ Coleman, A.D., Strand, Paul. *Aperture Masters of Photography: Alvarez Bravo*. (New York, New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc. 1987.)

¹⁰ Codrescu, Andrei. *Walker Evans: Signs*. (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1998.) viii, ix.

studying his work, I have become more aware of the importance of capturing such signage. It is an essential aspect of the preservation of place. Recording such evidence can be beneficial for the future analysis of cultural and economic conditions of specific time periods. It allows us to rediscover cultural histories by observing true to life representations of living and working situations.

Evans' work, *American Photographs*, is a great example of how images can be presented in a sequence to unravel particular understandings of the environments captured. Ultimately Evans is at the helm in determining how the viewer reads the photographs. In the organization of images for this exegesis's accompanying exhibition, Evans' style of grouping was analysed, particularly the ways in which it unravels and directs a detailed set of meanings through the presentation of the culture, architecture and the vernacular signage present on the street. Evans directs the thought process of the viewer by guiding them through scenes and circumstances depicting accurate



Fig. 4. Walker Evans, *Billboard, Birmingham, Alabama*, 1936.

situations of the American depression. Aspects of his compositional techniques have also been studied for use in my own photographic approach. This includes the flattening of subject matter within the focal plane, also apparent in Bravo's image *Landscape and Gallop*. This allows for an easier reading of the vernacular within the architectural landscape, as seen in Evans' image *Billboard, Birmingham, Alabama*,

1938. This technique is visually dynamic in the way it mimics the dimensions of the frame and directs your eyes to a particular surface. This technical approach creates compositions in which architectural features are centred and clear. The details of facades are focused and easily describable.

In one photograph titled, *Movie Poster, Louisville, Kentucky, 1935*, Evans replaces people in the landscape with painted representations. These rendered figures appearing within the advertisement take on their own personalities, holding unique expressions that resemble styles, movements, and emotions, which can be easily associated with the people and culture of the early 20th



Fig. 5. Walker Evans, *Movie Poster, Louisville, Kentucky, 1931*.

century. This photograph encapsulates the social settings of the times on a number of different levels, displaying the cultural trends of a period without capturing any evidence of the architecture or people, which were such a prevalent theme in his work. The beauty of images

like these is that when they are placed in a series they draw attention to certain specific trends. For example, when this particular image of a movie poster is placed next to a photograph of a crowded market we associate the poster and the figures represented, with other cultural nuances that are relevant to that locale. This sequence gives us extra content with which to reference the painted advertisements within the landscape. It is evident in looking at photographs like these that Evans was aware of the temporality of advertising and realized how it represented fundamental features of American life in the early to mid 20th century.

In the book *American Photographs*, Evans presents his images in a sequence that creates its own unique narrative concerned with the social and physical landscape. He presents the collected photographs in a way that unravels a story about the people and place. It is a series of images that depicts the struggling times of the depression ridden American south in the 1930's. "In intention and in effect they exist as a collection of statements deriving from and presenting a consistent attitude. Looked at in a sequence they are overwhelming in their exhaustiveness of detail."¹¹ Combining images of architecture, portraiture and the vernacular, Evans is able to clearly define the economic conditions of a place. The fading and tearing posters and advertisements that paste the walls of the homes and buildings express and explain the desperate culture of that environment.

One particular untitled photograph from Evans, referenced from the book *Lyric Documentary*, tells its own story by detailing architectural features in combination with the vernacular. This image stands alone as indicative of cultural and economic conditions. When placed within a series, it has even more descriptive power and relevance. The photograph focuses on a set of circus advertisements that are peeling off the exterior walls of a small barn. The faded flyers

¹¹ Evans, Walker. *American Photographs*. (New York: East River Press, 1975.)

shredding off the wall, symbolize a discouraged hope experienced within the community. Evans' photography is filled with images of decay and destruction, visual metaphors for the corruption he was witnessing in the American establishment. As described in an anonymous online article titled "American Vernacular", Evans was obsessed with photographing elements of dilapidation and social decline.¹² Often, he would display photos in pairs, using the second photograph to reveal a decayed version of the subject at hand. In this case, his use of the vernacular was a way of displaying the decay of the depression and the economic uncertainty of desperate times, juxtaposed with advertisements of a seemingly unattainable affluence.



Fig. 6. Walker Evans, *Barn, Monongalia County, West Virginia, 1935*.

This pictorial fascination with capturing text on the street proved just how invasive advertisements had become, and the limited lifespan of the flyers and posters presented shows us how flimsy some of these promises were in their projections. The vernacular that Evans captured

¹²<http://walkerevansfsphotography.blogspot.com/2011/03/american-vernacular.html> Retrieved October, 2011.

was a predecessor to the even more aggressive corporate marketing schemes found on today's street. We can learn about the changing cultural, economical and political situations of the twentieth century by examining the vernacular phrases he found and photographed.

As described in an article from the book titled *American Modern*, written by Jessica May, the book *American Photographs* questioned the very nature of photographic representation and narrative. Evans focused on time, repetition, and stasis as subjects upon themselves. His self-positioning was paradoxical. While creating a strong composition commenting on the struggling times of the American south, he simultaneously relied upon ideas about the independence and freedom of the modern artist.¹³ One of the ways in which he conveyed his observations of America was through the vernacular signage he documented on the street. He drew attention to the shrinking gap between local and national identity. This came through in the reoccurrence of particular brand names such as Coca-Cola and Phillip-Morris. Movie posters and advertisements would appear on the walls in completely separate locations. Evans used signs, posters and advertisements to illustrate the growing presence of a unified, national media. The products and ideas of large corporations were beginning to influence and infiltrate public space all across the country. He created a narrative not just concerned with the depression but with the emerging corporate influence on America's self-image.

In the book *American Modern*, Jessica May explains that although Evans did retain primary authority in the arrangement of images within the *American Photographs* catalogue, the organization and preparation of images in the accompanying exhibition differed greatly to that in the book.¹⁴ This tells us that Evans actually had multiple ideas as to the way his collected photographs could be

¹³ Corwin, Sharon, May, Jessica, Wiessman, Terri. *American Modern*. (University of California Press. 2010.) 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 61.

presented, and there were several combined arrangements he created to form his overarching narrative. Ultimately Evans exerted complete control over the way the viewer travelled through the landscape of the book. He is the one guiding us through the social and physical settings of the time, both in the exhibition and in the catalogue.

One prevalent theme that became apparent both through his



Fig. 7. Walker Evans, *Minstrel Showbill, Alabama* 1936



Fig. 8. Walker Evans, *Roadside Farmstand, Birmingham, Alabama*, 1936.

arrangement of images and his use of the vernacular was the changing pressure of racial tension present in America, particularly in the south. By arranging his photographs in a specific order, he unravelled stories about environments undergoing a historic transition. From his image *Minstrel Showbill, Alabama* to the *Roadside Farm Stand, Birmingham* Evans was at the helm in describing a culture and country experiencing tremendous change. His combination of capturing the vernacular, portraiture, and architecture revealed multiple storylines in which to read the social landscape, integrating racial tension, economic desperation, and the promise of a corporate, affluent America.

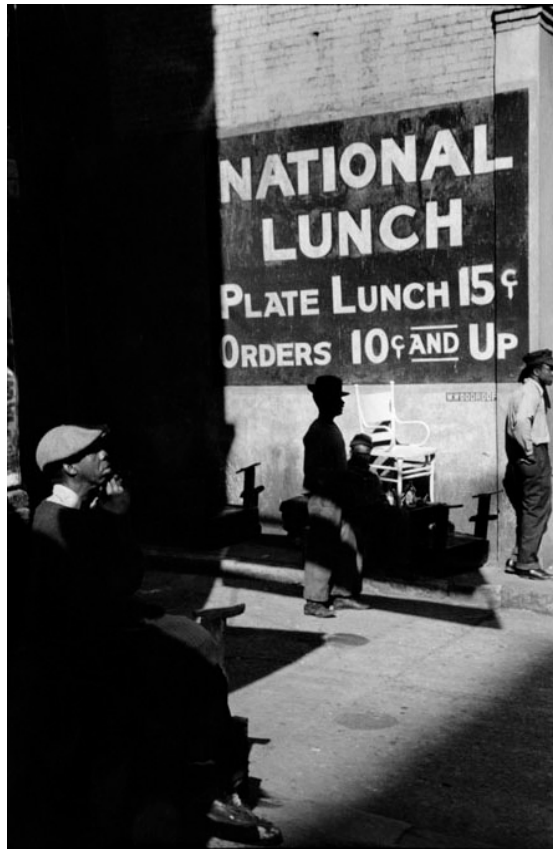


Fig. 9. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Memphis, Tennessee*, 1947.

Henri Cartier-Bresson was another artist who exhibited an amazing ability to capture the changing American culture in the mid 20th century by photographing a combination of vernacular signage, people, and the built landscape. His images of America through the 1940's and 50's can be seen as essential descriptions of the metamorphosis America was undergoing, both physically and economically. Although his focus remained primarily on portraiture within the built landscape, he captured the vernacular in similar fashion to Walker Evans, blending it within his compositions to create a multilayered narrative concerned with a national identity. Within my own work I attempt to unravel the identity of places by combining cultural and architectural features with street art. I feel that with this combination we can begin to understand the political and economic conditions attached to a place.

One photograph of Bresson's, featured in the book *Photographing America*, taken in Memphis, Tennessee, 1947, exhibits how this combination of elements can effectively be composed within a single frame. The image captures several figures standing in the shadows of a building, which are cast by the low sun. The sign above them reads National Lunch 10 cents and up. The irony in this image is the message written in large print in the alley. Not only does this message symbolize the transitioning American economy from local identity to global economy, it also depicts the dramatic changes in price and value.

Photographs such as these, display how photographs of vernacular expression have the ability to reveal socio-political identities of specific locations. This is a crucial concept in understanding the capabilities of photography in representing place. The images created by photographers in the early 20th century set a standard for this type of social documentation. The tradition of documenting people, architecture, and vernacular signage, in an effort to paint a picture of a culture and place, has been continued by several contemporary artists, such as Steven Shore and Joel Sternfeld, and will be discussed in the following sections.

Section Three: Vernacular Signage in Social Documentation – A Tradition Passed Forward

Contemporary Examples: Through the use of colour technologies, the concepts that were explored by photographers in the first half of the 20th century have been emulated, experimented with, and carried forward in the second half of the 20th century. The importance of such social documentation has become more apparent. As distance grows from the work produced by artists like Walker Evans in the early 20th century, it is easy to recognize the importance of visual records. For example, it would be impossible to re-explore the effects of the

American depression on the culture and landscape without the photographic works produced by Walker Evan at that time. Artists in contemporary times have taken it upon themselves to capture similar environments and cultural transitions through the camera's lens, utilizing concepts and techniques that have been passed down and improved upon. The technical execution of such concepts has changed significantly. While some still choose to use large format black and white film photography, the majority of artists have transitioned into colour photography, with the use of handheld medium format cameras and digital technologies.

Joel Sternfeld is an artist who took the earlier twentieth-century approach and recreated it to fit the modern American landscape. In the forward to Sternfeld's book, *American Prospects*, Andy Grundberg explains how he carried on this tradition. As Grundberg explains, Sternfeld's images are similar to those of Walker Evans, who captured a country undergoing transformation. Evans created a standard for the



Fig. 10. Joel Sternfeld, *The Bronx*, 1982.

portraiture of American culture within the landscape. He captured the signs, advertisements and roadside billboards that spoke ambiguously about a changing national identity. Evident in Sternfeld's images of America are elements of regional identity, which was already in

jeopardy when Evans' work commenced, eventually giving way to a uniform suburban lifestyle.¹⁵ The landscape became transformed by the opportunities of interstate highways and corporate business expansion. What Sternfeld was able to do with his book *American Prospects*, was to follow Evans' trend in photo-documentary, and bring forth his vision of the modern, contemporary portrait of a nation. One thing the book lacks, however, is a substantial review of the vernacular expression within the landscape. There is one image, however, on page 33 in *American Prospects*, taken in the Bronx, New York, which captures a sculpture of people on the side of a housing complex. The people in the sculpture hold a range of expressions and complexions that seemingly replaces the void of human life within the photograph. This image has a desolate feel to it. The sculpture reminds us of the diverse culture residing inside the architectural structure. The inclusion of both cars and nature within the photograph provide evidence of life and create their own narrative concerned with the specific time and place.

Photographs by Steven Shore, especially in the book *Uncommon Places*, include a wider range of vernacular signage. His photographs of corporate road-signs and faded storefronts, sprawling advertisements and various billboards draw a remarkable resemblance to the work of twentieth century photographers like Walker Evans and Robert Frank. The arrangement of images within his photographic collections, both *American Surfaces*, and *Uncommon Places*, draw attention to the misleading promises made by America's big businesses. The empty voids and dilapidated facades Steven Shore captured present a unique vision of contemporary America. He revealed landscape characteristics by combining elements of the vernacular within images of portraiture and architecture.¹⁶

¹⁵ Sternfeld, Joel, Grundberg, Andy. *American Prospects*. (Houston, Texas: Times Books, Museum of Fine Arts, 1987.)

¹⁶ Auping, Michael. Shore. *Stephen Shore Photographs*. (John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art: September 4– October 11, 1981.) 4

In particular, one image of a roadside billboard in Oregon presents a startling vision of the American landscape. Within the photograph there is a sign, which holds a painted landscape, and is simultaneously surrounded by the natural scenery that is pictorially represented. There is a small bit of the landscape missing or painted over. This juxtaposition symbolizes the significant impact American



Fig. 11. Steven Shore, *South of Klamath Falls*, 1973.

culture has had on the natural world as well as identifying how Americans have isolated themselves from the natural world. The road and the billboard, both man made structures, are dissecting the landscape. There is the painted image on the sign that stands as a reminder of how Americans perceive the natural world. The vernacular expression becomes the main subject matter, exposing numerous interpretations as to its message, but still expressing a universal truth. The billboard alone has impacted the natural environment, and the irony within the photograph is reflected by the imperfections within the painted landscape.

Artists like Steven Shore show us the virtues of continuing an established tradition. Although many of the creative questions around this type of documentation have already been addressed there is no

harm in revisiting their purposes and executing their intent in the modern world. If anything these artists established the fact that these images create important historical time-marks, and that it would be difficult to understand the transitions of a culture and landscape without them.

In *Eyewitnessing, The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Peter Burke describes the overall power images hold in providing visual evidence of specific events. The book explains how images can allow historians to analyse political and socio-economic trends. This text establishes a general understanding of how photography provides a historical account in its visual interpretation. This allows for photographs of vernacular expression, if carefully composed with the inclusion of context such as surrounding culture and architecture, to be considered as legitimate historic artefacts. As explained in this text, most historians don't take the evidence images provide as seriously as they should. Historians often prefer to work with texts, and political or economic facts. Photographs have the ability to capture deeper levels of emotional experiences linked to the analysis and observation of place. Compared to the numbers who work in the archives of written documents, relatively few historians work in photographic archives. Burke explains how images are not usually treated as evidence within this tradition. Instead they are used to exemplify conclusions that the author already proved by other means.

It is important to establish and recognize the power of images when dissecting social and cultural histories. Without the inclusion of images as evidence some historical descriptions of social practices would be incomplete. For example, it would be difficult to write about European prehistory, especially about the cultural progression of social practices, such as hunting, without the visual evidence of the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux.¹⁷ Similarly it would certainly aid in

¹⁷ Burke, Peter. *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2001.) 10

accurately rediscovering the effects of the great depression on the American South in the mid 20th century by analysing photographs taken by Walker Evans.

Burke explains how images offer substantial evidence about the organization and setting of events, both great and small. With photography, the memory of particular events is closely associated with the visual representations presented. Photographs, in a uniquely visual way have replaced the writing as a record of events. Before the camera, paintings, woodcuts and engravings performed similar functions, but lacked the capabilities of presenting a credible pictorial representation, one that could be used by historians to provide a substantial visual review.¹⁸ Burke explains how our sense of historical knowledge has actually been transformed by photography. He describes it as a medium that offers a much higher level of artistic realism than those available in the past. Although Burke makes a valid point, in the present day, the potential for photographic manipulation through programs such as Photoshop reduces the credibility of a photograph to represent an absolute truth. Despite the growing capabilities of photographic manipulation, since its origins photography has aided in the search for knowledge. We are able to reveal unique nuances of entire cultures and time periods by interpreting visual archives left by photographers in the past centuries. As this tradition evolves and develops, the importance of diverse visual representations will be a crucial form of documentary reporting.

Section Four: Establishing a Field: Street Art and Graffiti Replaces Vernacular Signage in Photographic Documentation

The vernacular signage captured by photographers in the 20th

¹⁸ Burke, Peter. *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2001.) 16

century can be related to the range of expressions found within modern street art, and this section will describe how they can be utilized in similar ways within the photographic field to provide substantial social documentation. They both reveal expressive layers within the locations in which they appear. The early pioneers in photography captured a sense of place with their documentation of vernacular on the street. I want to describe how street art and graffiti can be captured in similar fashion to reveal not only cultural and political identities but also the stories and experiences of the people on the street.

This section explores the documentation of street art and its lineage. Photographers like Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant have preserved a time in street art's history with their dedicated catalogue of images. These images capture street art within its environment, reflecting the experiences of the growing graffiti under-culture. Street art contributed to significant changes in the art world, by helping to take art out of the confines of the gallery space and put it into the public domain of everyday life. Without the camera, most public art would go unnoticed and undocumented, lost in the hands of time and the continuously changing nature of urban and rural spaces. As street art has progressed through the years, artists have continued to photograph it, and the technologies available have allowed the documentation of street art to reach new levels of accessibility. These technologies include digital photography, high definition film, and the Internet.

It is interesting to investigate how photography holds the power to create an artistic interpretation, while simultaneously documenting reality, recording a specific time and place and challenging the normal perception of art as historical document. As seen in a collection of images from a book titled *Subway Art*, compiled by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, street art's historical progression can be visualized through its photographic documentation. The images in this book preserve historical evidence of a culture for future analysis and

observation, providing a record of the pioneering people and events that influenced the birth of the street art scene. Without these photographs it would be impossible to discuss the individual street artworks of that era, due to the ephemeral, temporal nature of graffiti. These images provide a look into the important moments that shaped street art's voice, and how it became, as it progressed, a more complex reaction to the location in which it appeared.

These two artists, Henry Chalfant, and Martha Stewart, were among the first photographers who recognized how to photograph street artworks with significant context. They understood the importance of documenting street artworks within its surroundings, describing both the painting and the environment around it. Working relentlessly on the street these two photographers published a series of books and videos documenting the origins of the graffiti movement. They were able to create their own art while simultaneously documenting other artist works. This is a concept I have attempted to utilize within my own work. Because I am conscious of the fact that I am photographing another person's creative construction, I attempt to create my own artistic interpretation of the subject and its surroundings. This is a crucial role of the photographer in creating an understanding of the relationship between street artwork and the respective locale. There are many photographs taken of street artwork that fail to include any of the surrounding elements adjacent to the painted work. Without context in which to reference the artwork it is just a recreation of that artwork. In my own work, I attempt to create a relationship between street artworks and the location in which they appear so that the artworks can be read symbiotically as reflections and representations of place, or reactions against respected locations.

In one image, featured in the book *Subway Art*, taken by Martha Cooper, a complacent city commuter hides himself in a newspaper, neglecting the people bustling around him. He is sitting within a freshly painted subway car, amongst dozens of random tags and signatures. On the outside of the subway car, which has stopped in the

station, is a painting of a commuter train, similar to the one that pulled into the terminal. This image is an example of photographing street art with ample context. The extra information included around the paintings allows us to look at how everyday people interact with



Fig. 12. Martha Cooper, *Noc*, 1981.

the art, and where it sits within the community as a communicative tool. This photograph has a dynamic, stimulating composition, which opens the window for an analysis of both the captured artwork and how it relates to the environment and culture. This is an example of a photographer creating a unique artistic interpretation out of the street artworks and the city landscape.

Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant worked alongside many of the graffiti artists themselves. They utilized the photographs to compare styles and to search for inspiration. They had a solid connection with the graffiti underworld, which propelled them on their quest for interesting images. The graffiti writers in turn benefited from these photographs by receiving publicity and even worldwide fame. By having inside information Cooper and Chalfant would know what trains to wait for and received tips as to when murals were in

production.¹⁹ It was a unique advantage that added significant insight to their work.



Fig. 13. Martha Cooper, *Lady Pink With Freshly Painted Tag*, 1982.

By photographing the artists in their natural environments, and capturing the artists in the act of painting, they described the culture and the social scene from which it developed. One image from *Subway Art* shows a female graffiti artist named Lady Pink staring innocently into the camera while holding a spray can in her lap. She is sitting next to her name, which she has just painted with a fresh coat of white. Above her in the photograph are two or three more dozen artists names, all painted in black ink. This image speaks to the enormity of the graffiti scene within New York at the time; to do

¹⁹ Cooper, Martha, Chalfant, Henry. *Subway Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.) 7.

something, or be somebody that stood out, meant everything. Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper set the bar high for the photography of street art. Their publications burst on to the international scene, illustrating the vast growing under culture of



Fig. 14. Henry Chalfant, *Love Scandal and Memorial Car*, 1982.

public art on the subways of New York City. In one image found in the opening pages of *Subway Art*, New York and its expansive city skyline provide the backdrop to a vibrantly painted subway car rolling past in the foreground. This allows the viewer to visualize the environment alongside the street artwork. The photo displays a streamline of colour, which dashes through an otherwise stagnant sea of steel and concrete.

The most powerful part about these images is how they display aspects of a culture in a specific environment. They interviewed the artists and went with them on night train– painting missions. They followed them into their homes and studios and spoke to the artist's parents and authority figures.²⁰ Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, along with other photographers, like Jon Naar and Gusmano Cesaeretti, remained the catalysts of change for the blossoming art

²⁰ Cooper, Martha, Chalfant, Henry. *Subway Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.)

form. They held the key to the high art world, and essentially pushed the graffiti art movement from a local trend into a worldwide phenomenon. As described in *Arte Di Frontiera (New York Graffiti)* written by Francesca Alinovi, the collective of artists working in New York in the 1970's and 80's were responsible for the birth of an artistic revolution. They turned the art world inside out and opened the door for a new population of artists to express themselves. Following a path of desire and rebellion, graffiti writers created a unique language, describing a range of different urban references, and drawing attention to the chaos and complexities of real life and real people in their neighbourhoods. It was a generation of artists who sparked innovation into the art world, using new modes of expression to show what was lurking in the underground.²¹ The graffiti art at that time was about the people, for the people. The photographers working alongside these innovative youngsters were equally dedicated to capturing this revolutionary time before it was gone, and they did so in a way that allows us to reference the artworks within their specific locales.

After years of dodging authorities and municipal officials to paint murals on New York City trains, graffiti artists turned away from the subways and returned to the streets. Brick and concrete surfaces around the city became the new venue, or the new canvas for artists still struggling to gain acceptance. Portrayed as a deviant behaviour, and devalued for its aesthetic and social contributions, this aerosol art was negatively received by the mainstream media. However, denying artists their legitimacy only fuelled them to push their work, and to deliver a message that was truthful and authentic. As a consequence, the art form grew into a complex reaction to the pain and hardship the community was experiencing.

During the 1970's and 80's, New York was amidst the worst decade of crime in its history. Street artworks began to establish a

²¹ Alinovi, Francesca. *Arte Di Frontiera, New York Graffiti*. (Milan: Mazzotta, 1984.)

close relationship to the proliferation of handguns and escalating violence that could be found in many communities.²² Artworks began to reflect a culture living in violence and dislocation, demanding



Fig. 15. Martha Cooper, *Nicer, Bio, Brim, and B-GEE 183*, 1993.

grievance and voice in response to a time of suffering and loss.

Examples from this era can be seen in *R.I.P.: New York Spray Can Memorials*. These photographs display neighbourhood tributes to the deceased. In an image taken by Martha Cooper of a mural in the Bronx, New York, 1993, this relationship between art, cultural experience and place is evident. The painting in this photograph is a memorial for Jessica Martinez, a 21 year-old victim of gun violence, who was shot by a bullet that was intended for her boyfriend. The painting was done by an artist named Nicer, a member of the TATS Crew, who drew a single rose in remembrance of the slain victim. This artist used beauty as a signifier of death, an association not commonly seen at this time.

Murals like this one offer the passerby an opportunity for contemplation. It can be viewed as a station of solace in a turbulent unpredictable environment. The painting portrayed is an inspiring

²² Cooper, Martha, Sciorra, Joseph. *R.I.P.: New York Spraycan Memorials*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994.) 8.

token that holds a lost life warmly in its hands, gracefully reminding us that people care. This mural acts as a wake up call to the community, daring people to uncover the lost beauty of a young woman's existence. It also raises the awareness of the escalating crime epidemic present in New York City at that time.

The photograph is equally as powerful as the painting. It places two teenage women in front, to the left of the mural, pointing to the glaring juxtaposition between life and death, the physical and spiritual. The photograph incorporates a number of different effects to aid in the description of the artwork. There is the unfolding scene in a neighbouring garage and the suspended anticipation of a phone conversation. It includes the entirety of the buildings and their corporate signage. It shows the rubbish littered on the city asphalt, and the subtle existence of nature in the background. All of these visual representations allow for a window into the environment in which the victim lived. They offer the viewer the ability to link the street artwork to the cultural and natural attributes of the place.

The memorial tradition of mural painting marked the beginning of a new era in street art. There was now a new level of reflection within aerosol works. Paintings began to share experiences of a community, with the community, acting as a self-reflexive tool, delivering morals and messages that could educate and instruct. "Memorial walls are reminders of, if not indictments against, civil society's inability or unwillingness to address the systemic poverty and the pervasive racism that promote the rampant flow of drugs and guns into inner-city communities."²³

Memorial style paintings became more visually accessible than subway art. Words were more legible and the underlying messages were easier to understand. Consequently the paintings, and the photographs of the paintings could be read more effectively as indications of place. In *Picturing The Social Landscape: Visual Methods*

²³ Cooper, Martha, Sciorra, Joseph. *R.I.P.: New York Spraycan Memorials*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994.) 7.

and the Sociological Imagination, edited by Caroline Knowles and Paul Sweetman, this concept is solidified. This book is a compilation of various articles dealing with the different visual methods of interpreting the social landscape. It is a vital text in proving how the photography of street art contributes to the analysis of specific places. It is also useful in describing how photography allows for a timeless, worldwide analysis of social conditions.

In the book *Picturing The Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*, John Grady explains in an article titled “Working With Visible Evidence”, how photographs capture important aspects of emotional experiences, proving that images represent complex social processes and require careful interpretation. Grady explains how photographic image-based research encourages social scientists to pay careful attention to the explanatory potential of various kinds of data.²⁴

As Grady explains, images have the power to be informative historical documents. However, both the camera and technologies such as Photoshop have the ability to manipulate reality and the information captured. This creates apprehension among social scientists when relying on image-based research. Some feel there is a discrepancy between useful and misleading photographs. Grady explains how the interpretation of images requires a certain level of rigor, and that social scientific studies can be carried out on photographs as long as the information provided is sufficient, and the observer possesses the proper skills required to interpret the image. Grady explains how photographs are valuable artefacts because they encode an enormous amount of information in a single representation.²⁵ This suggests that when a photograph that captures street art combines all the surrounding physical elements within its

²⁴ Grady, John. “Working With Visible Evidence,” in *Picturing The Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*, ed. Knowles, Caroline, and Sweetman, Paul. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004.) 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 20.

composition, there is a complex narrative generated that can reflect the social landscape.

As an inevitable by-product of the properties of a photograph, it is possible for a picture to contain many meanings and sustain multiple interpretations. Therefore it is possible for any photograph to provide historical social narratives, even if the photographer did not intend it. In a sense, photographs wait for the viewers to fill in their meanings. It is up to the observer to engage with the subject and investigate the truth. Joel Snyder and Neil Allen, in an article titled “Photography, Vision, and Representation” offer the idea that this sometimes creates confusion between intended message and received message.²⁶ They argue that within photography there lie two distinctly different genres, but that the line between the two is constantly crossed and intermixed, due to the fact that there is no solid distinction established.

With the camera, the image created records a physical interpretation of something that happened at a specific time and place. John Grady in, “Working With Visible Evidence” argues that the means of communication can easily be modified by social scientists for their own purposes. Researchers, for the most part, only use images for illustrative purposes: to make a presentation come alive. However, relying on images only to illustrate arguments devalues the very thing that makes the image important as data, which is the complexity of combined elements represented within the frame.²⁷ This text helps to prove that photographic interpretations of street art should be considered legitimate contributions to the study of social science. As Grady explains, if carefully composed, any images have the ability to contribute to the study of ethnographic and economic conditions

²⁶ Snyder, Joel, Allen, Neil W. “*Photography, Vision, and Representation*”. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 143–169, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975.) Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1342806> 146.

²⁷ Grady, John. “Working With Visible Evidence,” in *Picturing The Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*, ed. Knowles, Caroline, and Sweetman, Paul. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004.) 20.

attached to the locations they are found in. Photographs of street art that include context, provide cultural narratives that consequently reflect the environment captured. They are visual records of a specific time and place.

This can be seen in photographs of street art that emerged on the Berlin Wall in Germany in the 1970's and 80's. The art in these images reflected an environment in social turmoil. This marked an important step in the German street art movement harnessing its own dynamic voice. It was starting to be used more consciously by artists as a venue for uncensored political activism.²⁸

In a photograph taken by Hermann Waldenburg, in 1984, it is evident that graffiti was acting as a desperate cry for a group of people who required a new venue to voice their issues. The image captures a complex mural of unrecognizable figures and creatures surrounding the portrayal of a large human eye. Within the painted eye is a white dove that covers the pupil. This symbolizes a culture still holding on to hope, not entirely bound to the harsh rules and realities of life in East Germany.



Fig. 16. Herman Waldenburg, *Plate 37*, 1984.

This untitled photograph holds great compositional value. It is a well-balanced, well-conceived visual interpretation of a painting and

²⁸ Waldenburg, Hermann. *The Berlin Wall Book*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.) 12.

place. The photographer flattens out the focal plane and offers an interesting juxtaposition between background and foreground, mimicking the glaring contradiction between constraint and freedom. In the photo we are presented with the snow covered concrete as a foreground, then our eyes are guided to the vibrant colour and humble message of the painting itself, then over the top of the wall for a glimpse of the other side. Photographs like this one hold a responsibility to provide their own artistic interpretations of another artist's work. They also document and preserve a historical narrative, providing visual evidence of an artworks existence. The most successful photographs are able to include both dynamics within their composition.

The Berlin Wall played a role in the progression of Street Art as an organized art movement. They were paintings that shocked the world with their brutally honest depictions of life. They were courageous public acts that were largely responsible for the formulation of street art's now organized active voice.

In the discussion of photography and street art as a representation of place, it is important to describe exactly how photographs of street artworks represent a cultural voice. The focus is to demonstrate how photography and street art can combine to provide complex social narratives. When describing the two mediums capabilities in representing a sense of place, it is important to recognize how street art is able to reflect social and cultural trends on its own, and recognizing how street art provides a channel of communication to the broader public, becoming the ultimate alternative venue for individual expression.

In *The All New Australian Graffiti*, Rennie Ellis explains how graffiti acts as a representation of social and cultural identities. The text explains how graffiti is a direct, honest, and refreshing personal expression of a single mind. Sometimes such expression represents the attitudes of a much larger social group. Ellis proclaims that graffiti art is the result of someone's urge to say something, to comment,

inform, or to simply confirm his or her own existence. She believes that graffiti is one of the great natural safety valves of society, an outlet that allows people to vent frustrations and anger, through the expressions of fantasies of hope and desire.

Ellis describes how street art offers clues into the social, economic and political climate of the environment in which it sits, explaining how graffiti can make significant contributions to later assessments by historians and psychologists alike. Communicative messages deposited on walls by graffiti artists can be a revealing barometer of attitudes within the community.²⁹

It is important to distinguish legitimate street artworks from acts of vandalism. However, there are similar things to learn from what both have to offer. The vandal, or graffiti bomber, subconsciously reacts to his or her surrounding environment, usually adding to the chaos of an environment already in decline. The purpose behind the dedicated street artist is to attempt change and revel in the challenge to turn the distraught and run-down, into the rejuvenated and rearranged. The action of illegal graffiti should not be dismissed from the conversation of street art, especially when establishing the art form as a solid representation of place. For the most part, illegal graffiti is a very similar way of signifying a statement revealing cultural attitudes capable of defining an entire social class.

As Ellis explains in *The All New Australian Graffiti*, artworks come and go, but the graffiti art movement is unavoidable, and cannot be eradicated. It is representative of a cultural voice, and it will always reflect purity in its message.

In a photographic project by Jeff Whetstone, titled *Post-Pleistocene*, the pseudonyms, signatures and varieties of vernacular expressions that encapsulate modern graffiti are visually explored through a series of images taken in caves in Tennessee and Alabama.

²⁹ Ellis, Rennie. *The All-New Australian Graffiti*. (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1985.)

The first image in the series is of the entrance to the cave. There is an array of multicoloured tags and monikers surrounding the exterior of the entrance. This image brings a range of interpretations with its presentation. Not only is it describing the attention grabbing voice of modern graffiti's language, it is also drawing a link to the first man made paintings found in the caves of Lascaux in France, estimated to be over 17,000 years ago. The image sets up the series to describe the



Fig. 17. Jeff Whetstone, *Wolftever Entrance*, 2008.

similarities and ironies presented by these markings found in and around the cave, where people have been writing their names for over a hundred and sixty years. As Jeff Whetstone describes in his artist statement, “When the work on these cave walls is compared to Pleistocene era art making, like that in the caves of Lascaux, one can imagine the course of human evolution—from frank representations of nature, to layered, expressive gestures that reflect a culture fascinated with personal identity.”³⁰ These images hold historical importance in visualizing that cultural evolution. The series also speaks about the personal experiences within that location over the years and establishes a representation of the stories and character associated with that place. It is a narrative concerned with the people that entered

³⁰ <http://www.jeffwhetstone.net/pictures/gallery/5/0/statement>

the cave, usually accompanied by a clue into their reasons for leaving a mark.

The drawings and markings found in caves are the ultimate predecessor to modern graffiti and street murals, and in some ways form the precursor to the multifaceted stories they present on the street. It may be important to draw a distinction between a piece of graffiti and a community mural, however for this paper, I think it is important to include all forms of vernacular expression, and discuss the uses of photographing these markings in establishing a place based identity.

Before the inception of graffiti and street art, artists were producing large-scale murals within communities all around the world. Separate from graffiti's illegal actions of expression, the mural found its place within this art movement as an organized, usually commissioned venue for artists to engage with their audience. Painting the exterior of buildings is a practice that dates back all the way to the Middle Ages in central Europe, before the Renaissance or the idea of art as a commodity. Examples of such exterior paintings can still be seen in small towns in Germany and Northern Italy.³¹

To establish a field for the photography of street art, we should include artists who pursued capturing and collecting images of public murals. In the 1970's Graham Cooper and Doug Sargent produced a book titled *Painting The Town* illustrating exterior public murals throughout the U.K. and Europe. The images collected display large-scale community and individually created murals, describing the surrounding culture and natural landscape. These images allow the viewer to read the murals as complex relevant stories that blend within the physical makeup of the specific locations. While most of the examples in this book are located within the U.K., the origins of contemporary exterior mural paintings can be found in North America.

³¹ Cooper, Graham, Sargent, Doug. *Painting The Town*. (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1979.)

Exterior wall painting had re-emerged in the wake of pop art, rudimentary graffiti, and the rebellious spirit of the late sixties. The street graphics of that time yielded depictions of various interpretations of city life. Many murals produced in this time were protesting oppression or seeking to inspire hope.³²

As street art has progressed through the years, the marriage between moral message and visual artefact has become more seamless and powerful with its presentation. The aesthetic balance between significant artwork and significant message has continued to grow, and strengthened as the art movement transitions into a more polished genre. For example, the work of Banksy has pushed street arts conceptual creativity to new limits. Banksy is an artist who has succeeded in presenting a political and social commentary through his work. He has shocked the world with his inquisitive opinions on worldwide political and social issues as well as introspective issues relating to the current state of street art. His concepts stand out of the box with bold honesty and humble inquisition. It is essential for political and moral messages to be included into the classification of street art.

In *Bathroom Graffiti*, Mark Ferem establishes the power of graffiti art in reflecting political beliefs. The book investigates how street art, legal or illegal, is a venue for self-expression, one that maintains a narrative of cultural and emotional identity. Some of street arts' messages comment on universal issues, some may reflect more local trends, but the majority of street arts' messages react to social and political influences. There is a lot to learn from this book about the power of graffiti's personal messages in conveying political ideas.

There are many valuable things to learn from the documentation of random phrases, crude jokes, and symbolic slogans that appear on bathroom walls. The candid messages are indicative of cultural and political frustrations present amongst the people, displaying the

³² Ibid.

capabilities of graffiti in being a communicative outlet with specific restraints . These images present an unfiltered representation of political viewpoints. The rituals of human culture captured in this book give us a different perspective of the perceived social order. One image from this book captures the phrase Smash The State



Fig. 18. Mark Ferem, *Smash The State Defend Mother Earth*, 2006.

Defend Mother Earth. This is a socio-economic political statement demanding a sense of activism from its audience similar to that portrayed by the artist. Using the bathroom as a venue to speak on this issue forces the public to read and listen.³³ This is one of the ways that street art has become a political asylum.

The documentation of street artworks allows for a worldwide circulation of political expression. The camera and other technologies have made it possible to produce pictures of current events and spread them almost instantaneously. This has played a major role in street art developing a political voice. Photographs that capture street art circulate artist's messages around the world, preserving political

³³Ferem, Mark. *Bathroom Graffiti*. (New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2006.) 98.

viewpoints of entire cultures for future historical analysis. The beauty of this partnership between photography and street art is that the message being translated can be enhanced by the technological and compositional capabilities of the camera. Every artist wants recognition for their work even if their identity remains anonymous. The majority of street artists strive to be heard, to reach a certain audience. Without photography, lots of international street artists would find it difficult to establish any sort of legitimate circulation of



Fig. 19. Banksy, *West Bank*, 2005.

their messages.

In an image taken from the book *Wall and Piece*, Banksy offers an inspirational comment on the fragile existence of life in and around Palestine. The photograph displays a stark scene; a blank grey wall that is cold and daunting constrains the viewer with the harsh reality of that regions oppression. The composition leads the viewer's eyes from the wall, to the painting, to the street. The artwork, done in black

paint, is a stencil of a small girl holding an assemblage of balloons. The girl is staring towards the sky as she is seemingly lifted up and over the thick border. Beneath the painting is a Palestinian woman who is walking swiftly between places, kicking through the scattered litter and rubble as she walks. This photograph carries a complex combination of ideas and impulses. As explained in *Wall and Piece*, Palestine has been under the occupation of the Israeli army since 1967. In 2002, the government began to build a wall that would completely separate the two territories. The wall stands three times higher than the one in Berlin and will eventually run for approximately 700km.³⁴

The graffiti that appears at the Israel–Palestine border is very similar to the artwork found on the Berlin Wall in the 1980's. The difference is that since its inception street art has grown to harness a global voice, as opposed to a strictly local one. Banksy, a London based artist, was aware of the oppressive political situation in Palestine, and travelled all the way from England with the objective to make a statement. This stretches the concerns of a culture to include people living outside the confines of the specific locale. The art is a reflection of its place and therefore it tries to hold a certain responsibility to care or give back to the community. But now graffiti moves from a local response to a global political reality.

The photograph of this painting allows it to be analysed away from the site in which it appears. By incorporating the people and the surrounding physical elements, this photograph first describes the place and then situates the graffiti into that scene. There are a number of different visual representations included inside the frame that allow us to better understand the location in which the artwork sits. The photographer surrounds the focal plane with a separate set of visual interpretations. By flattening out the angle of perspective on the subject in focus, the photographer isolates the street artwork in a

³⁴ Banksy. *Wall and Piece*. (London: Random House, 2005.)

visually containing frame, bordered by natural and cultural affects; indicative representations of place. This composition makes it easier to read the street artwork and easier to read the landscape, while at the same time revealing multiple layers of cultural and social information.

Photographing street art is a relatively new practice, however, by drawing from a range of influences in the art world, such as notable twentieth century photographers like Walker Evans to contemporary artists such as Banksy, we are able to construct a legitimate field defining its technical and conceptual ideals. While many of the images capturing graffiti present the work in a straight documentary approach, others have branched out and explored how to utilize the subject's surroundings. An image taken in 2004 by Jeff Chien-Hsing



Fig. 20. Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao, *5 Pointz*, 2004.

from his photo-documentary *Habitat 7* shows a famous painting spot along an elevated train line in Queens, New York. It is an example of photographed street art in a neighbourhood partly responsible for the inception of the colourful outlet of artistic expression. With the progression of the art we have seen a compromise between city officials worldwide and the artists respected performing spaces. As seen in this image most city's demand clean trains and streets while specific regulated sections are being permitted for public art. This particular image is one of many that were compiled in a series set out

to visually describe the communities surrounding the number 7 train line in Queens, New York. This series of images utilizes the photography of vernacular expression as a way to describe cultural and economic conditions attached to the captured location. This is one of the best examples representing the role photography can play in revealing the connection between street art and place.

Chapter Three: Methodology: Motives and Creative Process

For this exegesis's accompanying exhibition I set out to make photographs that document street art, graffiti, and commissioned murals in three different countries: Australia, South Africa, and the United States. Borrowing from a tradition of social documentation I attempted to photograph street art in a way that incorporates the landscape and describes the surrounding environment. In my work street art becomes the primary source of vernacular expression. Street



Fig. 21. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Worcester Liquor*, 2004.

art often embodies characteristics of transitioning environments; it transcends existing walls and anonymously pronounces a desired

cultural or political change. The main focus while in the field was to create images that represent place in a unique way. I set out to capture street art in a way that describes its location, in an attempt to tell a story about the place and its people.

Originally my photography dealt with the development and decay of urban and rural architectural environments. I would walk through places seemingly forgotten or cast aside. The images I collected would reveal spaces undergoing significant physical transformations. These were spaces that had become overwhelmed with change and overrun with nature. I became fascinated with the life emerging from such distraught places. I became especially intrigued by the evidence of life that would emerge in images of street artworks. This inspired me to investigate this relationship further. I was interested in how this combination of elements could be captured more effectively to represent a sense of place.

In my third year of photography studies I identified the fact that street art had become a recurring theme in my photography. I wanted to harness compositional elements to make it my own, and to research



Fig. 22. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Tailor*, 2007.

the values that made strong complex photographs. The focus was to create images containing ample context, including the surrounding culture as well as the natural and built surroundings. At this time I was

still photographing the street artworks in black and white, and was more concerned with finding interesting pieces of art than exploring the capabilities of the photograph. Overall the project fell short of my own expectations due to limited travelling opportunities and a lack of technical experimentation. After that particular project I knew I wanted to re-explore this concept and push my conceptual framework to truly understand the capabilities of describing a place through the documentation of street art.

For this exhibition I developed a series of large-scale photographic prints that depict street artworks in their surroundings. These photographs are grouped to present styles and expressions from three different locations, South Africa, Australia, and The United States. These photographs are meant to form a narrative concerned with the social, political, and natural identities of a place.

While studying within a close proximity to Melbourne and Sydney I had an excellent opportunity to photograph some of the premier street art hubs in Australia. Frequent visits to Melbourne proved that the city has one of the most vibrant and celebrated public art scenes in the world. The styles discovered through my collection of images have revealed the multi-cultural population of the city, and demonstrated the developing identity of its growing global culture. Trips to South Africa and the United States offered an opportunity to photograph locations possessing an entirely different set of styles and meanings within their street art expressions. When visiting the city of Cape Town, in South Africa, I was introduced to a successful street artist named Faith 47. Faith showed me around her neighbourhood and pointed me to areas containing interesting examples of South African street art. She provided me with a map detailing these locations, and personally guided me to many of her own public artworks within the community she works in. While in South Africa I collected some images, which include the necessary surrounding elements to consider them as significant descriptions of place. After photographing for a number of days with my Fuji 6x9 medium format

camera, I had some technical issues and could not continue. I then began creating images with a handheld digital camera. Some of these images are included in the exhibition, and displayed at a much smaller scale.

I also had several opportunities to travel to the United States, which gave this project a third country from which to identify the things we can learn about different places through the photography of street art. My travels brought me through Boston, New York, Seattle, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. The most difficult aspect of this project was locating and navigating to the sites containing the most interesting examples of street art. My exploration for such images usually began on the Internet, as I would try to track down locations, artists, and paint supply stores in search for clues to desired sites. Usually the hunt would gain momentum through word of mouth, and one clue would lead to the next. Wherever I would travel I always tried to find the most prolific examples of street art in the city, and my quest would usually leave me exhausted, travelling to all ends of the city in search for artworks.

Exhibiting my work at a few smaller galleries in town gave me an opportunity to experiment with the presentation of finished images. Some images speak more ambiguously than others about the places they appear; however, I feel that if sequenced appropriately they act as representations of their respected locales, and the comparison of styles can be effective. The exhibition consists of approximately 42 prints varying in size. The majority of prints remain a standard 18 by 27 inches, with a few larger prints highlighting the imagery in certain places. I also have a section of smaller prints, which can be read in a series detailing certain features and themes reoccurring in the images I have created over the years. In the organization of images for this exegesis's accompanying exhibition, Walker Evans' style of grouping was examined and utilized, particularly the ways in which it unravels and directs a detailed set of meanings. I have learned from this research that a particular arrangement of images can be effective in

controlling the visual journey of a viewer's experience. The concept of providing context, for example, can be stretched from the individual image to that in a series, and the scale of such context can be expanded significantly. This is a technique I have attempted to utilize within my own photography to better describe street art and the surrounding environment.

For the exhibition I have grouped the larger 27 x 18 inch prints in a way that explores street art and its different relationships to place within the variety of locations being photographed. For example, one grouping of three images that is included in the exhibition sets up this comparison. The first photograph was taken in Queens New York, at the famous outside graffiti gallery 5 points. This mural was produced by the present owner/curator of 5 points, Meres One, in collaboration



Fig. 23. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Meres One*, 2010.

with another local graffiti artist named Dizm. This mural represents a classic method of New York graffiti writing. This particular style is a way of displaying your name on the wall which is legible yet unpredictable and sophisticated. The words sit in the painting amongst a graveyard of spray cans, which is set up to represent the enormity of the street art scene within the city, while also calling upon past styles that were once practised by the originators of the graffiti

movement in New York; styles that were responsible for the progression of the art movement into a worldwide phenomenon. This image incorporates the painted work within its surroundings, including the nearby number 7 train line, which runs adjacent to 5 points. The image also includes the neighbouring buildings and street, which help to situate the viewer into the scene. This photograph attempts to incorporate unique architectural aspects of New York City, including the elevated train line and industrial backstreet. The image is meant to investigate the particular functions of street art within this context, and how New York created its own style, which can be read as a representation of the lively, rebellious, and innovative artistic subculture.

The second photograph in the grouping was taken in Cape Town, South Africa, and features a mural created by Faith 47 that contains the message, there shall be work and security. This



Fig. 24. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Work + Security*, 2010.

photograph was taken in the early evening on a busy backstreet in the mixed working class community of Woodstock in Cape Town, South Africa. Woodstock was one of a few communities to avoid South Africa's group areas act, a strict apartheid policy that segregated regions by race. Woodstock managed to maintain a multiethnic character and today is evolving into a complex cultural arts hub. The

painting captured in this image speaks directly about the integrity of the neighbourhood. The painted work portrays a figure that seemingly reflects the movement and attitude of the people captured in the foreground. The written text represents the aspirations of a growing, transitioning, working class neighbourhood. This image is an example of how including the people can aid in the description of a particular location, and how this combination of elements within a photograph has the ability to preserve important aspects of place. This photograph suggests several aspects of the community and the things that make it unique.

The third photograph in this grouping was taken in Richmond, just outside the city of Melbourne, Australia. The mural within this photograph appears on the exterior wall of Dimmey's department store, and was created to represent a chronological history of the Dimmey's company and the city of Melbourne. This work depicts the



Fig. 25. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Qantas*, 2010.

symbols of a nation, portraying the important people, businesses and events that brought the city to what it is today. This image was selected because of its ability to represent Australian culture within the captured painted work. The mural itself compiles cultural

references in an attempt to describe an urban Melbourne and Australian identity.

I set up the comparison between these three discussed images in a grouping to identify how artists in each of these locations relates to the place that they live, and to explore how they present unique visions of their respected communities. I want the viewer to understand how a particular location can be represented through the photography of street artworks, and how we can learn about these locations with the inclusion of elements such as the culture and architecture surrounding the street artwork. Each image in this series utilizes a different method of photographic presentation. One image draws context to the painted works through the incorporation of the architectural surroundings, while another details the people living within the community and how the street artwork relates to them.

There are a number of compositional approaches I have utilized to present the street artwork, including the use of a flat, frontal



Fig. 26. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Instincts*, 2011.

perspective. Most of the images included in the exhibition utilize a similar method of frontality within the composition to present the captured street artwork, emphasising a flat focal plane. The street artworks are centred and straightened, matching the dimensions of the frame. This method draws the attention of the viewer directly to

the artwork. Other captured elements such as the people, cars, architecture and natural surroundings help to break up the routine of frontality and create a certain balance within the photographs.

There is one grouping of five photographs that presents two images of captured street artworks at a different angle. The images are placed on either end of the sequence, while the other three images utilize the familiar method of front facing perspective. These images have been selected to break up the routine, and to create a more diverse visual reading of the selected locations.

Other groupings in the exhibition focus on detailing the captured street art from one particular location. These groupings highlight one specific location that can then be referenced on the whole to other groupings to understand how they reflect unique characteristics of place. This method of sequencing images can create a narrative exploring in more detail the characteristics of selected



Fig. 27. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Pittsburgh Series*, 2011.

locations revealed through the photography of street art.

With the smaller 4 x 6 inch prints I have attempted to create more context for certain images by grouping them with photos that include more information about the landscape. Even though most of these images don't contain any street art, these smaller images describe the context and surroundings, and therefore reveal more about the environment in which the street art appears. For example in a series of images taken in Pittsburgh, PA, there are two close up images of street art surrounding one image in the centre of the city, a neighbouring factory and its adjacent dwellings. This is meant to

situate the viewer into the environment and create a deeper understanding of how the presented street artworks relate.

I have also presented a few smaller images that show artists in the act of painting. This is a photographic technique that can be seen in the work of Martha Stewart and Henry Chalfant, two artists who immersed themselves into the graffiti culture of New York City in the 1980's. They photographed many of the street artists in action as they were creating works. For the purposes of this exhibition, this technique is meant to show how these paintings develop out of a personal journey that is directly related to the location in which they appear. Street artists are very passionate about their work and often times become so involved that they translate this personal connection



Fig. 28. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Rasty*, 2010.

to place directly onto the walls of their community.

For example, one image included in the exhibition, taken in Cape Town, South Africa, features an artist named Rasty applying the finishing touches to his painted character on the street. The blue

coloured figure is staring straight into the camera lens with a smirk expression, holding a broken skateboard in hand. A range of vernacular expression, a dense display of assorted advertisements that cover the storefront window, surrounds the painted figure. The artist Rasty is busy painting, while his carefully placed character seemingly comes alive out of the concrete scene. In some images its almost as if the painted characters become a part of the landscape. They end up replacing the culture on the street with unique representations of the local population.

Another example of this can be found in an image taken in Boston, MA, which features a life-like painted character of a woman peering out from the bricks. The image is taken across the street from a busy women's hair salon in the ethnically mixed community of Jamaica Plains. This painting seems to represent a certain attitude



Fig. 29. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Vasallos*, 2010.

present in this particular neighbourhood: an attitude of glamour and pride, toughness and responsibility. In photographs like this I am attempting to utilize similar techniques to those used by photographer Walker Evans in his book *American Photographs*. Evans often replaces the culture of a location with painted representations of the culture, which can be found within the vernacular elements that appear in

these locations. This method makes reference to the act of representation: how a culture images itself.

There were a large number of images collected for this project, and the editing process for the exhibition was done in stages throughout the course. The quality of the artwork captured played a role in the selection, as well as the street artworks' ability to speak of the experiences and attitudes of the culture found in such locations. I chose images that I felt best described the link between painted artwork and respected location.

For this project, I used a combination of technologies through the art making process. At the start I was using a Fuji 6x9 medium format camera with roll film, which I was then developing and scanning into the computer to create digital files. In the past I would take these images and make prints in the colour darkroom. A transition into digital printing became necessary, however, due to the loss of analogue colour printing facilities. Eventually I decided to transfer completely to the digital process by collecting images with a Canon EOS 5D camera and retaining digital files that I then would print in the digital darkroom. This transition proved to be more efficient, as well as allowing better technical control. The quality of images did not seem to change, in fact only improved as digital technologies added a freedom to the ease of capturing numerous photographs on the street. It allowed me to collect more material, transfer them quicker onto the computer, and to skip a number of steps in the cleaning and preparation of images before the printing stage. This switch has also enabled further experimentation within my work, such as the process of digital stitching, and HD film recording. There are many things that can be executed with digital photography that I never dreamed possible when using analogue film technologies, such as having the access to images immediately, being able to view what was captured on site, and being able to load them directly onto the computer.

When this project first started I knew I wanted to travel to a few different locations to collect images. There were trips planned that

didn't happen due to time constraints and economic limitations; however, I was able to capture over a thousand or more images since the project began. Through the editing process I feel as though I collected a representative group of photographs and enough material to create a narrative about street art as a representation of place.

Chapter Four: Conclusion and Discussion of Research Findings.

By extensively photographing place-based street murals from several locations around the world, the aim of this project was to capture street artworks in a way that provided context, allowing for the relationship between locale and artwork to be communicated. This was an attempt to investigate the function of street art as a response to place. The photographs are meant to be portals into both the present and past day physical appearances of a place, so that the audience analyses several layers of information, through both the painted representation of a place, and the photographic visual representation of that location.

The results of my photographic exploration revealed that the styles of street art collected from three different countries; Australia, The United States, and South Africa, displayed similar motives and messages. The exhibition of images represented street art as a worldwide phenomenon, expressing both local and international themes relating to cultural, economic, and political issues. On the whole, however, I felt that the photographs from these three locations, when composed with significant context, represented unique characteristics concerned with their respected locations.

In the images collected from Australia and the United States, the style of street art captured varied only slightly in subject matter and execution. It can be argued that the Australian style of street art borrows from a tradition of word assemblage and pictorial

experimentation that stems from the classic New York style of presentation. This makes sense, when you examine the cultural pressures and social settings of the two countries. Both are affected by a similar set of cultural influences and political authorities. I believe that the photographs of the two styles had the ability to preserve unique cultural trends relating to the identities of the two nations.

When examining the photographs of street art from South Africa, there was a more obvious distinction in styles and messages. It is recognizable how subject matter and meaning can be interpreted to represent political or social identities specific to this location. Images taken in South Africa proved to represent place, as they contained street art that confronted local cultural and political issues. The street art produced in South Africa is dynamic and stimulating in the way that it speaks about the cultural and political situations of the violent yet vibrant culture.

Similar to the approaches photographers used to capture the vernacular in the mid 20th century, my work attempts to create a local flavour of place by detailing street art and the multitude of stories and expressions that can come out of it. Street art has a certain freedom of expression, which has always intrigued me. It is an art movement which has few constraints and is for the most part exempt from the restrictions and expectations of the high art world and the pressure from the art consumer. This freedom allows for an unfiltered look into the lives and experiences that shine through the complex art form. The narratives and stories that develop through paintings on the street are an expression of a particular subculture. Photography has the capabilities to capture these mostly anonymous works within the context of their surroundings, while delivering complex storylines that we can in turn associate with the built or natural world surrounding it. Street art often remains unspecified as to the gender, race, or age of its maker. This allows for a detached and mysterious commentary of social, communal, and political issues, which can be instituted through even the most unequivocal and explicit pieces.

Through the collection and assemblage of images for this project I feel as though I have contributed to the field of social documentary and street art photography. Certain projects undergone in the past have consisted of compiled images of street art, which have been collected through the Internet and other sources. These projects have set up a similar comparison between styles and methods of presentation within street art from different continents. Although thorough in their compilations, for the most part these projects just detail the street art itself, and fail to include the surrounding context, which leaves something to be desired in representing the characteristics of a place. While my project has similar artistic methods and results, the main idea behind my photographic collection is to set up an analysis of place within this comparison. It becomes less about the comparison of styles of street artwork and more about what we can learn about the respected locations through the combination of elements within the compositions. I feel as though the inclusion of the street artworks surroundings allows for a more sophisticated analysis of place, and creates images that can be considered important for the historical preservation of cultural and political tendencies.

There have been a few photographic projects that have included substantial context to the street art being documented. Especially in the work of Banksy, in *Wall and Piece*, and the work of Martha Stewart and Henry Chalfant, in publications such as *Subway Art*, and *R.I.P., New York Spraycan Memorials*. I have tried to learn from these examples and improve upon the methods and techniques that make these images powerful commentaries on place. I have tried to push the boundaries and pinpoint exactly how to preserve place by capturing street art in similar ways. These publications open the door for a deeper exploration of the photographs capabilities in preserving street art. I feel that through the contextualization of this project, and a further exploration and experimentation of the photographs capabilities I have identified a field in which this type of imagery fits.

The more this concept is solidified, the more power these photographs can have in the representation of place.

Graffiti and street art are in many ways an encapsulation of the cycles and transitions experienced by their surrounding environments. Stores change ownership, buildings are replaced by new ones or declared abandoned, or rendered obsolete and forgotten. The world's street art scene is usually found amongst the areas most subject to change, as if subconsciously the street artist is aware of this irony, and plays it out to his or her advantage. The cycle of graffiti is a reflection of its changing environment. The photography of graffiti and street art captures a moment amongst this continuous cycle of development and decay, reflecting an experience of culture amongst place, so it can be preserved for future observation.

Appendix 1

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Appendix 2

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Brassai, *Eclipse*, 1933–1934. Gelatin Silver Print. *Graffiti*. Brassai. *Graffiti*. (Paris: Flammarion, 1993.)

Fig. 2. Brassai, *Hotel*, 1931. Gelatin Silver Print. *Graffiti*. Brassai. *Graffiti*. (Paris: Flammarion, 1993.)

Fig. 3. Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *Landscape and Gallop*, 1932. Gelatin Silver Print. 24.5 x 18cm. *M. Alvarez Bravo*. Livingston, Jane, Castro, Alex. *M. Alvarez Bravo*. (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 1978.)

Fig. 4. Walker Evans, *Billboard, Birmingham, Alabama*, 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. 19.1 x 24.1cm. *American Photographs*. Evans, Walker. *American Photographs*. (New York: East River Press, 1975.)

Fig. 5. Walker Evans, *Movie Poster, Louisville, Kentucky*, 1931. Gelatin Silver Print. 16 x 11 cm. *American Photographs*. Evans, Walker. *American Photographs*. (New York: East River Press, 1975.)

Fig. 6. Walker Evans, *Barn, Monongalia County, West Virginia*, 1935. Gelatin Silver Print. 25.4 x 20.3 cm. *American Photographs*. Evans, Walker. *American Photographs*. (New York: East River Press, 1975.)

Fig. 7. Walker Evans, *Minstrel Showbill, Alabama*, 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. 20.3 x 17.5 cm. *American Photographs*. Evans, Walker. *American Photographs*. (New York: East River Press, 1975.)

Fig. 8. Walker Evans, *Roadside Farmstand, Birmingham, Alabama*, 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. *American Photographs*. Evans, Walker. *American Photographs*. (New York: East River Press, 1975.)

Fig. 9. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Memphis, Tennessee*, 1947. Gelatin Silver Print. *Photographing America*. Sire, Agnes. Chevrier, Jean-Francois. *Photographing America: Henri Cartier Bresson, Walker Evans*. (New York, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001.)

Fig. 10. Joel Sternfeld, *The Bronx, New York*, 1982. Type C Print. 34.6 x 43.4 cm. *American Prospects*. Sternfeld, Joel, Grundberg, Andy. *American Prospects*. (Houston, Texas: Times Books, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. 1987.)

Fig. 11. Steven Shore, *South of Klamath Falls, Oregon*, 1973. Type C Print. 50.8 x 61 cm. *Uncommon Places*.

Fig. 12. Martha Cooper, *Noc*, 1981. Colour Photograph. *Subway Art*. Cooper, Martha, Chalfant, Henry. *Subway Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.)

Fig. 13. Martha Cooper, *Lady Pink With Freshly Painted Tag*, 1982. Colour Photograph. *Subway Art*. Cooper, Martha, Chalfant, Henry. *Subway Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.)

Fig. 14. Henry Chalfant, *Love Scandal and Memorial Car to Caine by Midg, Passing through Astoria*, Queens, NY, 1982. Colour Photograph. *Subway Art*. Cooper, Martha, Chalfant, Henry. *Subway Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.)

Fig. 15. Martha Cooper, *Nicer, Bio, Brim, and B-GEE 183*, Melrose, Bronx, New York, 1993. Colour Photograph. Pg. 18. *R.I.P. New York Spraycan Memorials*. Cooper, Martha, Sciorra, Joseph. *R.I.P.: New York Spraycan Memorials*. (London: Thames & Hudson, c1994.)

Fig. 16. Herman Waldenburg, *Plate 37*, 1984. Colour Photograph. *The Berlin Wall Book*. Waldenburg, Hermann. *The Berlin Wall Book*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.)

Fig. 17. Jeff Whetstone, *Wolftever Entrance, Tennessee*, 2008. Type C Print. Post Pleistocene. Accessed from www.jeffwhetstone.net/pictures/gallery/5/1 December 2011

Fig. 18. Mark Ferem, *Smash The State Defend Mother Earth, Bozeman, Montana*, 2006. Page 99. *Bathroom Graffiti*. Ferem, Mark. *Bathroom Graffiti*. (New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2006.)

Fig. 19. Banksy, *West Bank*, 2005. Colour Photograph. *Wall and Piece*. Banksy. *Wall and Piece*. (London: Random House, 2005.)

Fig. 20. Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao, *5 pointz*, Long Island City, 2004. Pigment Ink Print 20 x 48cm. Habitat 7. Accessed from <http://www.saulgallery.com/liao/statement.html>, January, 2012.

Fig. 21. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Worcester Liquor*, Worcester MA, 2004. Black and White Photograph.

Fig. 22. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Tailor*, Melbourne, Australia, 2006. Black and White Photograph

Fig. 23. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Meres One*, Queens, NY, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.

Fig. 24. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Work + Security*, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.

Fig. 25. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Qantas*, Richmond, Melbourne, Australia, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.

Fig. 26. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Instincts*, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.

Fig. 27. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Pittsburgh Series*. Pittsburgh, PA, 2011. Colour Photographs ea. 4 x 6 in.

Fig. 28. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Rasty*. Capetown, South Africa, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.

Fig. 29. Jacob Eli Thomashow, *Vasallos*. Boston, MA, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in

Appendix 3

List Of Works Submitted

1. *Qantas*. Richmond, Melbourne, Australia, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
2. *Work + Security*. Cape Town, South Africa, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
3. *Meres One*. Long Island City, New York, NY, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
4. *Jungle*, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
5. *Contents to Progress*, Glebe, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
6. *Love Letters*, Glebe, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
7. *Lies + Olded*, Glebe, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
8. *Tiger*, Newtown, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
9. *Faiths Angel (right)*, Capetown, South Africa, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
10. *Marka 27*, Roxbury, Boston, MA, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
11. *Angel 89*, Newtown, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
12. *Bees*, Collingwood, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
13. *Phibs AC/DC Lane*, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
14. *Phibs Fitzroy*, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
15. *Collingwood*, Collingwood, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
16. *Instincts*. Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
17. *Braddock*, Braddock, PA. 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
18. *Freycinet*, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
19. *Baby*, Northcote, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
20. *Mexico*, Newtown, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 27.5 x 18in.
21. *Innocent*, Capetown, South Africa, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 55 x 36 in.

22. *Queens*, Long Island City, New York, NY, 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 55 x 36 in.
23. *7 in Braddock*, Braddock, PA, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
24. *Heinz*, Pittsburgh, PA, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
25. *Birds*, Pittsburgh, PA, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
26. *Originality*, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
27. *District Six 1*, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
28. *City Mural*, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
29. *District Six*, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
30. *Bomb*, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
31. *Eras*, Seattle, WA, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
32. *Community Centre*, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
33. *Woodstock*, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
34. *People Panels*, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
35. *Os Gemeos, Bowery*, New York, NY, 2010. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
36. *Rasty*, Capetown, South Africa. 2010. Colour Negative. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
37. *Tramyard*, Glebe, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
38. *Co-Op*, Caimbridge, Boston, MA, 2010. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
39. *Vassallos*, Jamaica Plain, Boston, MA, 2010. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
40. *Itch*, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
41. *Fitzroy Skyline*, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.
42. *Sofles*, Melbourne, Australia, 2011. Pigment Ink Print. 4 x 6 in.

